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ABSTRACT

Creative dramatics or child-oriented dramatic play is a basic educative process that draws upon the learning strategies developed in children's play and relates them to classroom learning tasks. As a structured play process that encourages children to explore the world in ways familiar to them, creative dramatics relates new experiences to old ones, increases the range of associations of familiar words and objects, and adds to the base of adaptive responses. In the classroom, activities such as pantomime, story dramatization, and sensitivity exercises are most effective when the teacher provides a definite structure, establishes limits, and follows these guidelines: the child is the center of every creative dramatics activity; children proceed at their own rate without fear of failure; and there is an on-going evaluation process. When dramatics is linked to the reading process, the child's understanding of the written material is enhanced and the reading process becomes more enjoyable. (Dramatic play exercises are appended.) (MAI)

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A Question of Basics

by

Walter C. Prentice

and

Jon Charles Tabbert

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Creative Dramatics and Reading: A Question of Basics

By Walter C. Prentice
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In the midst of a burgeoning "back-to-basics" movement in education it may seem blasphemous to advocate the inclusion of creative dramatics in the elementary curriculum, but that is exactly what we propose to do. We run the risk of appearing out of step because we are certain that the back-to-basics movement is marching in the wrong direction. Although we share with the back-to-basics advocates a concern for the quality of education which we are providing for children, we break rank when they shout the order to toss out such non-academic "frills" as music, art and creative dramatics from the elementary curriculum in order to have more time for drill in phonics and arithmetic facts.

In attempting to defend creative dramatics as a legitimate educative process worthy of a place in the elementary curriculum, we have approached creative dramatics from three different angles. First we will discuss the importance of play in children's cognitive development, as indicated by recent research in the area of children's play behavior, and will suggest that creative dramatics, as a form of play, offers a way to bring the child's play competence to bear on classroom learning. Second, we will treat creative dramatics as an activity which has value in and of itself, revealing some of the common misconceptions surrounding creative dramatics in the elementary classroom, and suggesting ways to implement a creative dramatics program. Finally, we attempt to legitimize creative dramatics by tying it to the substantial coattails of reading instruction and by considering the potential value of creative dramatics as an integrative process.

Learning is Child's Play

Play is highly suspect in some educational circles; it is that thing children do when they are not working on their lessons. The school day is divided into two periods, "work time" and "play time" or "school proper" (when learning is supposed to take place) and "recess" (when everyone takes a break from the arduous task of learning). But psychologists, in their attempts to explain how children learn so much before they come to school to be properly taught, have discovered that children have been using their "play time" to learn. What appears to the untrained eye of the adult as frivolous and self-indulgent play is for the child, in many cases, a serious attempt to make sense of the world. For the curious adult, we recommend two excellent collections of research in the area of children's play; Child's Play, edited by R. E. Herron and Brian Sutton-Smith, and Play: It's Role in Development and Evolution, edited by Jerome Bruner, Alison Jolly and Kathy Sylva. (See our references for complete bibliographical information.) In a review of the latter title, Jerome Singer (1977) states:

> ...play is far from a trivial pasttime of the young. Play behavior must be studied if we are to learn more about the cognitive and emotional development that takes place so dramatically in the first five to seven years of life...In the course of hours and hours of...daily play, children are trying out new words, establishing new contexts of interaction, learning to adhere to rules of certain types...and practicing skills in imagery and role playing. Clearly, play is an arena in which a vast amount of learning inevitably takes place. (p. 225)

As some psychologists have left the confines of the carefully controlled laboratory experiments and have entered the world of children to observe their play behavior, they have offered valuable new insights into the learning process. Erik Erikson has proposed the theory that "the child's play is the infantile form of the human ability to deal with experience by creating model situations and to master reality by experiment and planning" (in Gilmore, 1971, p. 321). Anyone who has observed a child role playing an adult activity has witnessed the experimentation which accompanies the performance. In his play the child bends reality to fit in with his existing forms of thought; in this sense play is a conservative process, an act of assimilation in Piagetian terminology. But the child in his playful interaction with the environment also makes adjustments in his thinking; that is, he accommodates his cognitive structures to fit reality more closely. As Sutton-Smith (1971) has observed, "when a child plays with particular objects, varying his responses with them playfully, he increases the range of his associations for those particular objects. In addition, he discovers many more uses for those objects than he would otherwise" (p. 254). Play increases the child's repertoire of responses to the environment, an increase which has value for subsequent adaptive responses. In short, the child broadens his knowledge of the world by playing with it.

The point we wish to make here is that creative dramatics, to the degree that it incorporates those elements of play which contribute to the cognitive and affective development of children, is a legitimate activity to include in the elementary curriculum, and a powerful tool for enhancing learning in other content areas. Forman and Kushner (1977) have leveled a serious charge against traditional instructional techniques: "Classroom learning is made dissimilar from the strategies the child has been using, and using well, all his preceding life" (p. 6). Creative dramatics is a way to make classroom learning more accessible to children by building on their well-practiced strategies for knowing which have developed through their play. In a very real sense, creative dramatics can provide a link between a child's learning experiences outside and inside the school, a "continuity" which is vital in all human growth.

Creative Dramatics--

Legitimizing Play as a Learning Strategy

As we have already mentioned, in some educational circles creative dramatics carries the stigma of being a "frill" course, and perhaps in some instances its application is frilly. Two possible explanations for the negative attitude toward creative dramatics are:

(1) Teachers and administrators have tended to think of creative dramatics as subject matter, a specific content which competes with other subjects for valuable classroom time.

(2) Creative dramatics is "play-like" and smacks of fun and non-productivity; therefore, many educators are suspicious of its appropriateness as a school activity.

We have addressed the latter concern by suggesting that play and learning are not antithetical behaviors, and fun is not inimical to learning. (We recall the rather extreme position expressed in the following remark made by an ex-superintendent: "Why should school be fun? Life isn't.") As to the concern that creative dramatics is just another content area, we argue that creative dramatics is not a specific content but rather a process for dealing with a broad range of contents. As Brian Way (1967) has put it, "drama never needs interfere with a crowded curricula; it is a way of education in the fullest sense; it is a way of living" (p. 7, emphasis added).

There is still some confusion surrounding creative dramatics in the elementary classroom. Many elementary teachers have not taken a course in creative

dramatics as a part of their teacher preparation; few educational institutions require such courses. Those creative dramatics courses which are offered are most likely taught by theatre departments rather than by elementary education departments. Theatre departments tend to be oriented toward secondary, rather than elementary education and, consequently, are more likely to treat drama as a content area, a subject to be developed in the course of a semester. Little help is offered the elementary teacher interested in creative dramatics as a process which can be integrated into the regular classroom routine. Misconceptions arise, then, because:

(1) Teachers lack formal training in creative dramatics and tend to equate it with putting on a play from the basal reader, or

(2) They have learned the "content" of drama without capturing the "spirit" of creative drama as a process for enhancing all learning.

Winifred Ward was one of the first educators to appreciate the educative value of dramatic play. We offer the following quotation from Miss Ward because it expresses so eloquently the innate dramatic resources in children and the great potential of creative dramatics as a classroom activity:

> Once upon a time, but not so very long ago, some boys were playing an exciting game in an alley. To a woman who watched the game from a window the place was an ordinary alley; but to the boys it had been transformed into good, green Sherwood Forest, and they themselves were Robin Hood and his band of merry outlaws. The woman, impressed by the utter absorption of the boys in their make-believe, began to realize that if this natural dramatic impulse had potential value in education, it was a great waste of power to ignore it. She ventured to experiment in her classroom by giving her pupils opportunity for free dramatization of scenes from history and literature. Other teachers here and there over the country were encouraged by the new trends in education to explore creative dramatics' possibilities also, and to discover that here was an art through which many children might find their own best avenue of expression. (Ward, 1961, p. 132)

Creative dramatics, as we define it, is child-oriented dramatic play, the informal drama that is created by the participant, for the participant. It includes such activities as pantomime, story dramatization and sensitivity exercises. It has nothing to do with memorizing lines to recite before an assembled audience; it is not formal drama or theatre, as most people know it. The intrinsic value of creative dramatics lies in its origins in children's play, in children's role playing and playful manipulation of their environment as a means of sorting out their experiences and of constructing a viable theory of reality. Like play, creative dramatics is learning through direct experience. It is a structured play process that allows and encourages children to explore the world in ways familiar to them, in a direct, first-hand way, relating new experiences to old, increasing the range of associations of familiar words and objects, adding to the repertoire of adaptive responses. In a very real sense creative dramatics can bring "life" into the elementary classroom, can "revitalize" learning in all areas of the curriculum.

We now offer some suggestions for getting creative dramatics started in the classroom and conclude this section by stating some cardinal principles which can serve as guidelines in developing a creative dramatics program. Our discussion is necessarily sketchy and is intended as an introduction for those readers who are not familiar with the literature on creative dramatics. We recommend that the interested reader consult one or more of the resources listed at the end of this article.

One of the most important things for the teacher to realize is that it is not necessary to be a drama major in order to design and implement a successful creative dramatics program. As we have indicated, creative dramatics is not a body of knowledge but rather an approach to learning which values the unique experiences and learning competencies each child brings to the dramatic activity. The well-prepared teacher is one who values the lives of children and who is willing to risk trying something new.

The primary role of the teacher is to provide a structure within which the creative dramatics activity can take place. The teacher must set limits and establish some rules or guidelines, as in any group activity. A pre-determined and agreed upon signal for getting the children's attention is useful. Contrary to some opinion, creative dramatics is not an unstructured free-for-all. The teacher controls the activity, not by controlling individual responses to the stimulus, but by determining when the activity is to begin and end, and by stopping the activity in progress to issue new instructions or offer suggestions if necessary. By telling the children what to do, who to be, but not how to do or be it, the teacher eliminates the uncertainties associated with freedom while at the same time providing a genuine opportunity for free expression.

We recommend that the teacher start out slowly, spending no more than fifteen minutes a day on creative dramatics activities for the first few weeks, in order to allow both the teacher and the children time to become accustomed to this new kind of classroom activity. We have provided some examples of several simple "warm-up" exercises in the Appendix.

The first cardinal principle of creative dramatics, to be kept uppermost in one's mind, is that the child is at the heart of every creative dramatics activity. It is what the children discover about themselves and their relationship to others and to the environment that is important, not that they demonstrate competence on prescribed task or measure up to a pre-determined behavioral objective. And although the idea for the creative dramatics activity may originate with the teacher, each child develops that idea in whatever way he or she sees fit, using the considerable skills developed in play, incorporating new ideas, new knowledge, by relating them to his or her own past experiences.

A second principle is that creative dramatics is an inclusive activity that allows all children to proceed at their own rate free from the fear of failure. Children feel confortable participating because they learn that there is no "right" or "wrong" way to interpret an idea or a character, only "their own" way. By valuing each child's unique responses, the teacher validates that child's past experiences. Valuing unique responses fosters individuality and promotes an atmosphere of respect for individual differences.

The need for an on-going evaluation process is the third cardinal rule for creative dramatics. Children engaged in play are continually evaluating and re-evaluating their performance, making adjustments, repeating an action to get it right. The teacher's primary role in the evaluation process is to describe what he or she sees the children doing, and to extend their thinking by asking questions. "Did you notice what your hands were doing when you were showing anger with your face?" "How did you feel about the character you were portraying?" "Did you notice that Sally's 'old woman walk' was different from yours? I wonder why?" "What are some other ways you could express the same emotion?" Taking time out to discuss what is going on, to ask each other questions, to try out new ideas, and to talk about it some more, is an essential part of any creative dramatics program.

Having discussed some of the major aspects of creative dramatics as an activity "in and of itself," we turn now to a consideration of creative dramatics as an "integrative" process.

Creative Dramatics and Reading

It is safe to say that reading is the most highly regarded subject in school. The ability to read is essential for success in school; a great deal of what children are expected to learn, they are expected to learn through reading. It is this fact, we suspect, which has prompted some back-to-basics people to advocate spending more time on reading and less time, or no time at all, on the "non-essentials" such as creative dramatics. It is our belief that these people fully appreciate neither the reading process nor the experiences which promote learning in children. We contend that creative dramatics, as a learning strategy, has a great deal to contribute to reading instruction. Before providing evidence in support of this claim, it is necessary to explain what we mean by "reading."

Educators disagree, not only on what is the best way to teach reading, but even on what constitutes reading. We define reading as "comprehending written language," a fairly non-controversial definition. John Carroll (1972) has suggested that "comprehension may be regarded as a process that contains at least two stages:

(1) Apprehension of linguistic information

(2) Relating that information to wider context" (p. 13).

Some reading educators contend that beginning reading behavior falls almost exclusively into Carroll's first stage, and they advocate emphasizing decoding skills in beginning reading instruction. The psycholinguists, on the other hand, argue that both stages operate even in the earliest instances of reading, and that beginning readers are attempting to relate the information they have acquired from printed symbols to a wider context, to their own prior knowledge about language and reality. We favor this latter position because it focuses on reading from the very beginning as a search for meaning, and recognizes the importance of the "meanings" a child brings to the reading act in his or her attempts to make some sense of written language.

Creative dramatics is a learning strategy which helps children relate new experiences and information to their own past experience and knowledge of the world, expanding their range of associations and broadening their range of meanings. In this sense, creative dramatics is very similar to, or at least complementary to, the reading process. Creative dramatics can enrich the meanings which a child brings to the printed page, and thus enhance the understanding which the child takes away from the written message.

Here is an illustration of what we mean. It is not uncommon (although too infrequent) for teachers to have their students dramatize a story or a poem they have just read. The story or poem becomes the content for the creative dramatics activity. We recommend this use of creative dramatics with reading because it does add life to the literature, it does enrich the child's reading experience and understanding. But we also recommend turning this sequence around, doing a creative dramatics activity before reading a story, something which, to our knowledge, is seldom, if ever, done. What is done before a child reads a story seems at least as important for his comprehension as what is done after reading. Too often teachers think that asking questions after a story is a way to build comprehension. But this is just a way, and an imperfect way at that, of measuring the comprehension that has taken place. Reading is not, as one child defined it, "what you do before you answer the questions" (McCracken, 1977, p. 74). It is more likely "what you do after you ask the questions." Creative dramatics is a technique for helping children ask a lot of questions before they read. Here is an example of what we mean. A teacher's script might read as follows:

"The basal story for today is about a child who gets lost in a big department store. What does the big department store look like? (Discussion) Show me with your face what it feels like to go shopping.

(Activity) I see that some of you like to shop and some don't. Choose a partner and take turns at being a sales clerk and a customer. (Activity) Now be a mannequin and we will try to guess what department you are in. (Activity) How would you feel if you got lost in a department store? (Discussion) Show me with your face (hands, body position, movement) how you feel. (Activity) If any of you have ever been lost in a big store, show us how you felt without using any words." (Activity, discussion, evaluation)

The teacher's script will vary, of course, depending on what he or she has identified either as important story elements to develop or as elements which lend themselves to dramatic interpretation. The point we wish to make here, and it is really the point of the whole article, is that, by discussing and acting out ideas and events to be encountered in a story, the children bring more understanding to the story, interact more thoroughly with the words of the author and come away with a better sense of the story and how it relates to their own lives. The follow-up discussion of the story is also enhanced by relating the way the characters in the story acted to the way in which the students acted out ideas and feelings when faced with a similar situation. Role playing, acting out ideas, exploring different ways to express a feeling or concept--these activities add an important dimension to the normal pre-reading discussion and provide raw material to relate to the story during and after reading.

The teacher who utilizes creative dramatics in the classroom is valuing, and thus validating, the unique experiences and competencies of each child and is helping children relate their own lives to the learning tasks they encounter in school. Some children are more intelligent in the medium of action than in the medium of language, and creative dramatics provides this child with an opportunity to share his expertise with the class and to feel good about it.

In this section we have stressed the cognitive, rather than the affective, aspects of creative dramatics as they relate to reading, because they seem less obvious. But the affective delight which often accompanies dramatic play also contributes significantly to enhancing reading instruction. Integrating creative dramatics and reading will not only improve the child's ability to comprehend written material, but will also make reading more enjoyable. The result may well be a child who not only reads better, but who reads more.

We view creative dramatics as a basic educative process which draws upon the learning strategies developed in children's play and relates these strategies to classroom learning tasks. Rather than eliminate creative dramatics from the elementary curriculum, as the back-to-basics sympathizers would do, we advocate its inclusion, both as a valuable activity in and of itself, and even more as an integrative activity which can contribute to the quality of learning in all areas of instruction. And although we have focused our attention on creative dramatics, much of our argument would apply to the other "arts" which have been slated for extinction by the back-to-basics advocates. The final report of a recent conference attended by prominent businessmen, scientists, artists and educators declared that "the arts, properly taught, are basic to individual development, since they more than any other subject awaken all the senses--the learning pores" (Brodinsky, 1977, p. 35). The report went on to say that music, dance, poetry and creative dramatics are not only valuable for their own sake, but frequently help improve reading scores.

In 36 Children, Herbert Kohl states: "The time has passed when the schoolmarm, equipped to teach the three R's by rote and impose morality by authority, has something useful and important to give children" (p. 54). We believe that the "something useful and important" we must give to children is respect for their basic competence as learners, a competence which is exhibited long before they come to school. Creative dramatics, as an approach to teaching and learning, begins and ends with a respect for the competencies of each child.

Appendix

Once a teacher has decided to utilize a creative dramatics approach to reading instruction or enhancement, it is imperative for the teacher to work with the children in some introductory "warm-up" exercises that will serve as preparation for more sophisticated activities later. While there is no definitive number of preparatory "warm-up" exercises that should be employed, we would recommend a minimum of six introductory sessions. The majority of the exercises provided below call for little individual involvement, and thus little individual pressure, and tend to be group oriented.

EXERCISES

Exercise One: The Senses

This is an exercise that is designed to show the child that we really do not fully utilize our senses, and, thus, our potential as people may never be fully met.

Sight: Have all the children make a list of all the colors that they see in the room (exclude clothing). Compare and talk about the lists.

Hearing: Have all children close their eyes and listen quietly for one minute. At the end of the minute have all children make a list of exactly what they heard. Compare lists.

Taste: Have children pick bits of food from a paper bag and have them attempt to identify the items by tasting them. A variation would be to have blindfolded children taste various liquids: cola, 7-Up, tea, water, coffee, orange juice, etc. and see how many they can successfully identify.

Smell: Place various objects in a series of paper bags and ask the children to identify the object via smell (e.g. a pickle, an apple, a piece of peppermint candy, a stick of cinnamon).

Touch: Ask children to pick an object in the classroom and describe it according to touch. For example, if a child chooses a desk top the teacher might ask the student to discuss it in terms of size, smoothness or roughness, is it hot or cold, etc.

Exercise Two: Add On Machine

In this exercise the teacher and the children build a human machine. A child is placed in the center of the room and asked to make a physical movement (raising the right arm); a second child is added to the first and told to do some other type of physical action (bend over from the waist while holding the first person's left arm). After all of the children have been added the teacher then acts as the controller of the machine speeding it up and slowing it down.

Exercise Three: Circular Add On

Similar to Machine Add On, children position themselves in a large circle. Child number one is asked to make a physical movement or gesture (kicking out left leg). The second child must then duplicate the first child's action and then add one of his own (raising right arm). Obviously, the object is to go around the circle adding new movements or gestures.

This exercise, in addition to being a great deal of fun, is ideally suited for developing concentration in students.

Exercise Four: Magic Table

This is the only warm-up activity that is individually oriented rather than group oriented. Using an empty table the teacher asks each child one at a time to go to the table and select an imaginary object from it. The child should then show the class what the object is by using the object, showing the weight of the object or showing the size of the object. The teacher can help the success of this activity by having objects or pictures of objects scattered about the room.

This is a simplistic, yet effective, early pantomime activity.

Exercise Five: Mirror Image

Each child in this activity has a partner. One child is the real person while the second child is the mirror image. The mirror image should attempt to follow as carefully as possible the movements of the real person. The children can then switch places and continue the exercise.

This also is a simple exercise for developing pantomime skills, concentration and cooperation with another person.

Exercise Six: Facial Moods

In this very simplistic exercise the teacher asks students, either as a group or individually, to show certain moods using only facial expressions (e.g. anger, happiness, sadness, loneliness, shyness, etc.). The teacher should then discuss with the children how they felt while making the various faces. Are there similarities between various moods, such as shyness and loneliness or happiness and satisfaction?

This is an excellent exercise that allows children to understand that their bodies can convey a great deal of meaning to others, that body language is a valid form of communcation.

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